The Me Too Movement in Iran: What Is New About It? What Can It Learn From Abolitionist Feminism in U.S.?

written by Frieda Afary | September 23, 2020



For the past month, an unprecedented development has started to take place in Iran. Thousands of women and some men have started to speak publicly on social media about their experiences of sexual harassment, abuse, assault and rape. Although in the past, some individual women and men have occasionally spoken about sexual abuse online, the current wave has lasted longer and embodies a more diverse group.

The perpetrators include an IRGC (army) commander and member of parliament, clerics, journalists, university professors, artists, various professionals, students and ordinary people including brothers, fathers and other family members. What stands out, however, is the cases of famous men of arts and letters who claim to be defenders of women's rights.

Multiple complaints about a well-known sociologist and anthropologist, Kameel Ahmady's sexual abuse of women and abuse of power, has led to the suspension of his membership in the Iranian Sociological Association until further investigation. Ahmady is an academic with a focus on gender, children, ethnic minorities and child labor. He is the author of works on female genital mutilation and on child marriage in Iran.

There are also 22 mostly anonymous allegations of sexual abuse and attempted rape against a prominent artist, Aydin Aghdashloo. One case involves a woman journalist, Sara Omatali who met him at his office for an interview in 2006 only to be confronted with a naked Aghdashloo attempting to rape her. Laleh Sabouri, a film actress and student of Aghdashloo has also claimed that sexual misconduct was a natural part of his behavior.

The public exposes have included many stories of incest and abuse by women of a variety of backgrounds. However, the voices of working-class women speaking for themselves are still faint.

For now, a socialist feminist activist in Tehran has started publishing a series of interviews with working–class women who have been sexually abused for a lifetime and have been forced to turn to sex work to earn a living. These testimonials have been confirmed by social workers helping the interviewees as well.

The reactions to the current Iranian Me Too movement online have ranged from enthusiastic support to contempt. Some are encouraging more women to speak out. Some are calling women "spoiled

brats" who are "making a big fuss."

Context of Emerging Me Too in Iran

These public disclosures mark a very important development in a country in which women have been subjected to the repressive and misogynistic Islamic Republic for 40 years, and where there is a great deal of shame and fear of becoming outcasts associated with talking about sexual abuse. Under the previous regime, the Pahlavi monarchy (1925-1979), which claimed to be Iran's first modernist government, even though women had some limited rights, they were still subjected to sexual harassment and assault at home and at work, as well as political repression imposed on society as a whole.

It is not surprising, however, that more Iranian women are now speaking publicly about sexual abuse and assault. The Islamic Republic has not been able to stop them from attending universities and getting bachelors' and post-graduate degrees. Over 60 percent of Iran's college graduates are now women. Women have published novels and translations of feminist works. Whether college graduates or not, women are now more literate and have also been exposed to the world through the internet. There was a failed but nevertheless important Million Signatures Campaign for gender equality initiated by women activists in 2005. Women have also participated in various waves of popular protests against the regime since December 2017. In fact, a wave of women taking off their headscarves in public places began a day before the December 2017-January 2018 mass protests which called for an end to the Islamic Republic and an end to its military interventions in the region. During the November 2019 and January 2020 popular protests, women played a much more visible role as leaders of protests.

There have also been internet campaigns by Iranian women, men and LGBTQ activists against honor killings and other forms of femicide, and in support of women political prisoners. Iran's most famous woman political prisoner, Nasrin Sotudeh, is a feminist human rights attorney who is currently serving the third year of a fifteen-year prison sentence for her defense of women who removed their headscarves in public and for her opposition to the death penalty. She is currently on hunger strike. Another well-known woman political prisoner, Kurdish activist Zeynab Jalalian has been in solitary confinement for months and is going blind after thirteen years of imprisonment. Other women in prison include working–class women who used drugs or took the blame for their husband's debt or defended themselves against an abusive partner. Some are in prison along with their babies and small children. All are suffering from exposure to COVID-19 in a country where the pandemic is raging.

What Can We Learn from Me Too in Iran & What Can It Learn from Abolitionist Feminism in U.S.?

There is no doubt that an important force in propelling the new campaign of Iranian women speaking publicly against sexual abuse has been the global Me Too movement. It has had a powerful impact on the minds and hearts of Iranian women who have gained courage and realize that they should not remain silent about sexual harassment, abuse and rape.

Among those who have written about the new Me Too movement in Iran in the English-language media, Masih Alinejad and Roya Hakakian argue that Iranian women have come to the conclusion that the hijab will not protect women from predators. Rather "what can actually shield them from sexual harassment is the rule of law, and a society in which no individual figure can reign above the constitution."

Alinejad and Hakakian believe that "in contrast to the Me Too movement in the countries of the

West, which aimed to upend gender inequality, the current outpouring in Iran does not see gender inequality as the problem but merely as a symptom of a more serious affliction: the regime itself."

In response, Sara Tafakori has argued that "the primary referent of the women speaking out is neither the state nor the regime; it is the very misogynist and patriarchal structures of both workplace and society." She emphasizes that this movement's "points of orientation are . . . global and universal." She also challenges Alinejad and Hakakian for being uncritical of western imperialism and proposing western liberalism as a model for Iranian women.

This is an important debate. There is no question that the Me Too movement arising in Iran demands laws that support women, and in doing so also strongly opposes both the Iranian regime and patriarchy and misogyny on a global and universal scale. However, there is more to say about the actuality and potentiality of the Me Too movement in Iran.

In a recent article, Narges Imani, a young socialist feminist translator and researcher living in Iran argues: "But there is an important and partially contradictory point which has received less attention: Explanations based on patriarchy as a mental construct. . . see the education of more and more men concerning respect for women's rights as the solution for confronting the lack of culture leading to sexual harassment. In fact, however, the main perpetrators of the current assaults are "very cultured" men, some of whom are famous figures in the field of art or science or ideas. Fundamentally, one of the main reasons for the shock brought about by the recent exposes is not so much the mere fame of these assaulting figures but the damage which these exposes have done to "the cultural explanation of patriarchy".

Imani goes on to argue that the impact of the logic of capital on the body and the mind needs to be addressed. In this article and others, she addresses the ways in which capitalism uses both precapitalist forms of domination such as "masculine-centeredness" or religion and more modern forms of domination to discipline the body or to shape our desires, to commodify and instrumentalize human relations.

In light of the important questions and ideas raised by Imani, we can also return to the origins of Me Too movement in the U.S. and draw out critically important dimensions that can help the Me Too movement in Iran and globally.

The Me Too movement arose in the U.S. in October 2017 when Hollywood actress Alyssa Milano publicized the many accusations of sexual harassment and rape against Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein. The Me Too campaign, however, was originally started in 2007 by an African American woman Tarana Burke, who had been conceiving such an effort for ten years since 1997 after a conversation with a thirteen-year old young woman victim of rape.

In a 2017 interview, Tarana Burke has emphasized that her goal and vision in starting the Me Too campaign was to take the conversation beyond the level of individuals, whether the accuser or the accused, and focus on challenging and uprooting structural foundations of power and privilege in our society. She started with the aim of focusing on women of color, transgender folks and people with disabilities who experience the highest rate of sexual violence in the U.S. Her preoccupation has been "real structural change" and transformative justice because "many perpetrators are themselves survivors of sexual violence, particularly child sexual abuse. And that complicates a lot of things. We've got to get a clearer understanding of what justice is and what people need to feel whole. And if we're ever going to heal in our community, we have to heal the perpetrators and heal the survivors, or else it's just a continuous cycle."

Abolitionist Feminism, a movement started in the U.S. by African American women concomitant with

their theorizing and struggle against the Prison Industrial Complex, also further articulates the goals and vision of the Me Too movement. Abolitionist Feminist leaders such as Tarana Burke, Angels Davis, Ruth Wilson Glmore, Joy James, Avery Gordon, Romarilyn Ralston, Mariame Kaba, oppose gender violence and see it as part and parcel of the racist, sexist and heterosexist capitalist system which is carceral in its foundation. They oppose capitalist dehumanization, commodification and all relations of domination.

In the *Feminist and the Sex Offender,* Abolitionist feminists, Judith Levine and Erica R. Meiners also emphasize that gender violence cannot be separated from state violence. They argue that "Me Too is evidence that without thoroughgoing social change, the law does little to protect people from sexual harm." (p. 30) Furthermore, "freedom from violence is not an end in itself but rather the atmosphere in which all can flourish." (p. 5)

Iranian women who are speaking out against sexual abuse, assault and rape can find much inspiration in Tarana Burke's definition of the Me Too campaign and in Abolitionist Feminism. Living under an authoritarian police state which currently holds 240,000 prisoners including hundreds of political prisoners, they have no trust in the Iranian criminal justice system.

Conclusion: Need for Solidarity

The Iranian Me Too movement and struggle against femicide is a critically important development that is raising important questions for the global feminist movement.

This movement needs support from feminists around the world. It also needs active support from Iranian labor activists. Currently there is a wave of ongoing labor strikes in Iran which oppose non-payment of wages, dangerous working conditions and the "privatization" of formerly state enterprises which are facilitating greater state exploitation of labor.

Although Iran's labor movement includes many women including teachers and nurses, the struggle against gender and sexual violence has not entered the public conversation within the labor movement. Such a separation is hurting both the labor struggle and the struggle for women's emancipation.

Will labor activists and women demanding an end to gender violence join forces to defend women's right to self-determination and help move the struggle forward?